

"Middlesex Man"

Palaeolithic Man in N.W. Middlesex 1887

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With the view of partly realising the changes which have since taken place on the face of the country – let us imagine ourselves to stand by the side of the Palaeolithic hunter near the top of Castlebar Hill, Ealing, in the winter of that period, upon one of the beds of gravel which mark the level at which the waters had previously flowed in still earlier times, but which will then be depositing the gravel at the 130 foot contour.

I select this height, as one of the pointed flint implements I have described was discovered in such a deposit at that level, and therefore the presence of man at that time cannot be doubted.

How different on every side from the present aspect is the prospect before us! Instead of the fresh verdant fields of Perivale, Alperton and Harrow Weald, the frozen waters are spread over all that country, extending far to the north towards the hills of Hertford shire, with stretches of land here and there; Horsington, Harrow and other hills appear as islands, clothed with firs and other hardy plants deep in snow. The country is mantled in snow; and thick ribbed ice has set fast the stream of the wide river at our very feet, or within a stone's throw of us to the south, and extends for miles in that direction.

Herds of reindeer may be seen in the distance, seeking for the means of subsistence beneath the snow, by the aid of the special antler which kindly nature has provided them with for the purpose. The mammoth with its long upwardly curved tusks ¹ – is in the woodlands, and with him the companion whose remains are often found associated with his – the woolly rhinoceros; the hibernating marmot may be disturbed in its winter's sleep; ² the arctic lemming is about, and the river drift hunter is pursuing the musk sheep and reindeer. ³ As the night comes on the discordant cries of bears, wolves and wolverines are heard as they sally forth from the thickets to seek their prey.

Our Palaeolithic hunter is clothed in the skin of the reindeer and is armed with his rude spear pointed with a flint flake, as he comes from his rough shelter of boughs and rushes to hunt the deer and other game, or, perhaps, like the Esquimaux, he is

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going to break the ice in the river with his stone maul or hatchet in search of fish.

If under similar circumstances we survey the country in spring time how great is the change!

The ice is breaking up in all directions, and the wide river is traversed by huge masses of it, which often carry a burthen of stones and clay they have borne from the banks, or gathered at the bottom of the stream. Near where we stand with our remote predecessor, the river is flowing with a swift current impinging on the shoulder of the hill and depositing the large stones and coarse gravel which we find there; on the south eastern slope at the same level the waters are more tranquil forming the finely laminated sands and loam, which may now be traced extending for more than a quarter of a mile in that direction.

To the south the river extends for miles, dotted probably with islets or eyots of sand and alluvium such as may be observed in the Thames now. The waters are spread out to the eastward, where the great historic city stands with its millions of busy toiling struggling men.

"There where the long street roars" the river is depositing gravel and alluvium. The great pachyderms are disporting themselves, where stand the stately city churches and offices of the merchants and the river drift - man is there unwitting of the glory and the gloom of a higher civilization.

Perhaps, as often happened in those days, a debacle of ice has been formed in the river lower down, and the tumultuous waters, unable to pass the barrier, are much extended to the north, exerting great eroding power both there and in the main stream; or with the rapid thaw a heavy fall of rain has occurred causing a great flood and consequent rapid removal and accumulation of drift in the valley. In both cases the banks of the river and the shores of the islands are torn up and carried away, sweeping away the wigwams and winter camp of the river-drift man with his weapons and tools in their sudden desolating overflow.

The reindeer is seen in herds preparing to migrate northwards, and the bisons, uri and wild horses are taking their place upon the pasture as it appears from beneath the snow.

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As they pass the fords, the bears, wolves and hyaenas are hovering on their flanks, or in their rear, to cut off the weaker ones. The mammoth and woolly rhinoceros are browsing in the woodlands, the cave lion and wild boar are in the thickets; and the hippopotamus, who may have had, as Prestwich has suggested, also a hairy coat, is a frequent visitor to the banks of the wide stream.

At that time the whale found his way as far up the river as Fenchurch Street and the Minories, ⁴ and it may be that the Palaeolithic men, by the aid of their harpoons and flint knives, had an occasional feast on its blubber, like some of the other savages which have been described. It is not improbable that walrus and seals may also have been obtainable at that period.

As time goes on, the exact duration of which it is possible only to vaguely estimate, the more permanent level of the wide river is lowered to near the 100 foot contour, and Palaeolithic men are living on lowlying ground at that level; the waters still cover large tracts of country to the North and West, connected still by shallow broads and lagoons with the main stream, while to the eastward the river is flowing where Wormwood Scrubbs, East Acton, and other lower lying ground now are.

A number of Palaeolithic men have gathered together at the spot we now call Creffield Road, then probably a small island in shallow water, to fabricate their weapons and tools; with my discovery of this old working site before us, we are able to fix our ideas on the precise spot where they are at work. We are here on the very workshop floor where the river drift men sit chipping the nodules of flint they have collected for the purpose. There lie spear heads, rough celts and other objects of flint, which they have made with the waste chippings and the remains of their blocks; there also are the flaking chisels and hammer stones they employ in their work, and the flakes which they have struck off, which it is still possible to replace.

The river is swollen by floods and is rising; as the water approaches them they hasten away, and are gone "leaving their finished and unfinished tools and weapons behind them," on ground probably covered with low brushwood or rushes. And so they remain and are covered up in the sand and loam brought by the flood water until they are again exposed to human eyes.

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Probable method of making Stone Implements in Palaeolithic time, grounded on the plan adopted by modern forgers.

What a gap in the history of human life lies between these events!

Since they were buried in the silt of the river so long a period has elapsed that the mammoth, woolly rhinoceros and other creatures have become extinct, and the mammalian fauna has almost entirely changed in this country, while gradually those forms of life, now so familiar to us, have been evolved.

When we consider that since man first lived in this region, fluvial combined with subaerial agencies have eroded and removed most if not all of that enormous mass of matter represented by the difference between the level of the present Thames and that of the summit of Castlebar Hill, which is now more than 150 feet above it, but which then formed the lower level at which the waters flowed, the time necessary for the accomplishment of the work seems almost appalling. It is not surprising that many minds shrink from the contemplation of such a measure for the antiquity of Man in North-West Middlesex, and like Autolycus

"Sleep out of the thought of it."

Nevertheless the discoveries during the past thirty years place the fact beyond the region of doubt. Men are growing up with the conviction that the received chronology is utterly inadequate for the purpose, and with their minds better furnished in the future they will find in the contemplation of the higher antiquity of man, than has been advanced even here, no more to cause dismay and religious difficulty than there is in the contemplation of the fine adjustments and fitness

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which is so apparent in every one of the links of the great chain of life, which lies between the most minute organism and man himself.

As Professor Huxley says: "History shows that the human mind, fed by constant accessions of knowledge, periodically grows too large for its theocratical coverings and bursts them asunder to appear in new habiliments, as the feeding and growing grub at intervals casts its too narrow skin and assumes another itself but temporary. Truly the imago state of man seems to be terribly distant, but every moult is a step gained, and of such there have been many." ⁵

The relics of the earliest men of the world have yet to be found; many geologists are of opinion that they have been met with in deposits of Pliocene age. M. M. Mortillet and Quatrefages even believe that they have evidence of human agency in Miocene times; the general verdict among British geologists however is "not proven;" still, as Dr. E. B. Tylor says, "there is no particular reason to think that the relics from the drift beds or bone caves represent man as he first appeared on earth. The contents of the caves especially bear witness to a stage of savage art, in some respects fairly high, and which may possibly have somewhat fallen off from an ancestral state in a more favourable climate. Indeed the savage condition generally, though rude and more or less representing early stages of culture, never looks absolutely primitive, just as no savage language ever has the appearance of being a primitive language. What the appearance and state of our really primaeval ancestors may have been seems too speculative a question until there shall be more signs of agreement between the anthropologist, who work by comparison of actual races of man toward a hypothetical common stock, and the zoologists, who approach the problem through the species adjoining the human." ⁶

Though the habits and ideas of the lowest savage men appear to be but little removed from the brutes, yet, in the words of Mr. Alfred R. Wallace, "they by no means surpass the ingenuity or forethought of the jaguar who drops saliva into the water, and seizes the fish as they come to eat it; or of wolves and jackals, who hunt in packs; or of the fox, who buries his surplus food till he requires it. The sentinels placed by antelopes and by monkeys, and the various modes of building adopted by field mice and beavers, as well as the sleeping place of the orang-utan, and the tree shelter of some of the African anthropoid apes may well be compared with the amount of care and forethought bestowed by man savages under similar circumstances.

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His possession of free and perfect hands not required for locomotion enables him to form and use weapons and implements which are beyond the physical powers of brutes; but, having done this, he certainly does not exhibit more mind in using them than do many lower animals. What is there in the life of a savage but the satisfying of the cravings of appetite in the simplest and easiest way? What thoughts, ideas or actions are there that raise him many grades above the elephant or the ape? Yet he possesses, as we have seen, a brain vastly superior to theirs in size and complexity; and this brain gives him, in an undeveloped state, faculties which he never requires to use. And if this is true of existing savages, how much more true must it have been of men whose sole weapons were rudely chipped flints, and some of whom, we may fairly conclude, were lower than any existing race; while the only evidence in our possession shows them to have had brains fully as capacious as those of the average of the lower savage races." ⁷

The great law of the evolution of the higher from the lower forms of life, which the palaeontologist and biologist see has been in operation from the earliest time on earth, is equally manifest to the anthropologist in regard to the development of the mind of man.

The difference in the culture between savage and civilized man is enormous, but the links connecting its various stages are not wanting.

As the eminent naturalist, from one of whose works I have quoted, says, "The brain of prehistoric and savage man seems to me to prove the existence of some power distinct from that which has guided the development of the lower animals through their ever varying forms of being."

From the infinitely remote ages, when the first germs of life of any kind appeared on earth, every plant and every animal has been subject to the law of physical change due to a certain mysterious potentiality within the first rudiments of organic life as well as to the changing conditions or environment of its existence. As Mr. A. R. Wallace says, "As the earth has gone through its grand cycles of geological, climatal and organic progress, every form of life has continually but imperceptibly moulded into such new shapes as would preserve their harmony with the ever changing universe." ⁸ "Man, by the mere capacity of clothing himself and making weapons and tools, has taken away from nature that power of slowly but permanently changing the external form and structure in accordance with changes in the external world which she exercises over all other animals."

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The possession of that subtle quality we term mind, as we find it in man, has enabled his race to survive while other creatures have died out." Though with a naked and unprotected body," says Wallace, this gave him clothing against the varying inclemencies of the seasons. Though unable to compete with the deer in swiftness, or with the wild bull in strength, this gave him weapons with which to overcome both. Though less capable than most other animals of living on the herbs and fruits that unaided nature supplies, this wonderful faculty taught him to govern and direct nature to his own benefit, and make her produce food for him when and where he pleased.

From the moment the first skin was used as a covering, when the first rude spear was formed to assist in the chase, when fire was first used to cook his food, when the first seed was sown or shoot planted, a grand revolution was effected in nature, a revolution which in all the previous pages of the earth's history had had no parallel, for a being had arisen who was no longer necessarily subject to change with the changing universe; a being who in some degree superior to nature, inasmuch as he knew how to control and regulate her action, and could keep himself in harmony with her, not by a change in body but by an advance in Mind."

Thus, unlike the intelligence manifested by the lower animals, the mind of man is capable of progressive development, which is not discernible in the brutes, and although its progress may from time to time have suffered an apparent local reverse, its effect on the world is not lost; the waves upon which it is borne are finally seen to be persistent and sure; just as the advancing tide, with many apparent recessions and pauses, steadily encroaches on the sea shore.

Mr. Alfred R. Wallace discerns more than this in "the grand law of continuity which we see pervading the universe," and "would lead us to infer infinite gradations of existence, and to people all space with intelligence and will power; and, if so, we have no difficulty in believing that for so noble a purpose as the progressive development of higher and higher intelligences, these primal and general will forces, which have sufficed for the production of the lower animals, should have been guided into new channels and made to converge in definite directions." ⁹

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Footnotes

1 At Brentford many of the bones were found little or not at all worn by attrition, and the long tusks of the elephant were found entire. See Quart. Journ. Geol. Soc., Vol. vi., 1850, "On the Occurrence of Mammalian Remains at Brentford," Morris and Layton; and "An Account of some Organic Remains found near Brentford," by Trimmer, Phil., Trans., 1813; also "Geology of Oxford and the Valley of the Thames," by John Phillips.

2 The pouched Marmot, Lemming and Musk sheep were found in valley drift deposits at Fisherton, near Salisbury, associated with most of the other late Pleistocene Mammalia, and also with remains of the wild goose, *Anser palustris*, and wild duck, *Anas boschas*; they were determined by Dr. Blackmore, and described by Mr. John Evans. See "Ancient Stone Implements," p 552.

3 In 1855 the skull of the Musk sheep (*Bubalus*, syn. *Oviboe*, *mosehatus*) was found in the ochreous gravel of Maidenhead by the Rev. C. Kingsley and Sir John Lubbock; the identification of this fossil with the living species being made by Professor Owen; it has also been found by Sir John Lubbock near Bromley, in the valley of a small tributary of the Thames. Lyell, "Antiquity of Man," 8rd Edition, p. 156. A skull was also discovered by Professor Boyd Dawkins in the lower brick earths at Crayford in 1866, and is now preserved in the Museum of the Geol. Survey.

4 The fossils are now in the City of London Museum. In Whittlesea Mere remains of Walrus and Seal have been found, while as far south as Waterbeach, less than ten miles from Cambridge, the remains of the Whale have been discovered. "Ancient Stone Implements," p. 696.

5 "Man's Place in Nature"

6 Address to the Anthro. Section, Brit. Assoc., 1879

7 "On Natural Selection," p. 342.

8 "Loc. Cit.," pp. 315, 325.

9 "Loc. Cit.," p. 370.